

Primary literacy teaching: A detective story

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Detective dramas are quite the rage, but you need look no further than the humble schoolbook for a mystery that even the most discerning sleuth would find tricky to unravel, says UK teacher Beth Budden.

Put your best deerstalker hat upon your head, perch your glasses at the end of your nose and get your notebook ready: this is the curious case of the missing capital letters and full stops.

The mystery unfolds

For teachers of all age groups, getting children to use capital letters and full stops consistently and correctly is a job that never seems to come to an end. Weary teachers up and down the country hunch over exercise books every day, only to find that those most basic of writing elements seem to have gone astray. Few pupils use them correctly all the time, some not at all, and the rest drop them sporadically over nearly every piece.

Why this happens is a mystery. Because, as early as the end of Key Stage 1* (KS1) in the UK National Curriculum, this knowledge should be secure for most. The KS1 teacher assessment framework, or TAF, states that pupils reaching the expected standard by the end of Year 2 should “demarcate most sentences in their writing with capital letters and full stops”.

So, what’s going wrong?

Making initial enquiries

We should start our investigation in Reception*. Careful: these kids ask difficult questions.

According to the UK National Curriculum, capital letters and full stops are not required to be taught until Year 1; however, most Reception teachers will introduce these through the modelling of writing simple sentences, as well as drawing children’s attention to them while reading. Which is a good thing.

In addition, Reception teachers will verbally model full sentences and encourage pupils to do the same.

Again, this is a good thing. A surprising proportion of pupils start school unable to speak in complete sentences and, as writing is so closely connected to speech, being able to speak in sentences is an important prerequisite for the written sentence.

At the same time as all this is going on, children in Reception are immersed in learning phonics, whereby they will learn the lower-case grapheme correspondences for the sounds of each letter through daily focused sessions. Although most children will be taught capitals as well, the emphasis is, of course, on lower-case letters.

Here’s your first clue: teachers are therefore working with a natural default to lower case from there on in.



To Year 1, Watson!

Walk down the corridor and into the slightly more formal setting of Year 1.

Here, the children still ask awkward questions. In Year 1, teachers begin to teach pupils to demarcate simple sentences through a range of methods. Modelling simple sentences with a capital and full stop is a principal approach, as is continuing the ‘talk for writing’ from Reception.

Many teachers accompany clear written modelling with a kinaesthetic approach, or what is more commonly known as ‘kung-fu punctuation’.

With the intention to embed sentence punctuation into pupils’ memories through movement and voice, pupils physically punctuate sentences with hands in the air when they begin the sentence to signify a capital, then end the sentence with a powerful kung-fu air punch for the full stop, accompanied with a loud “ha!”.

Children love this, and initially it reminds them how to open and close a sentence when saying it out loud; however, when young pupils sit down to write, their focus is often consumed by coping with the physical skills needed for writing, along with organising their ideas, rather than demarcating a sentence correctly.

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Usually pupils will have to return to sentences to correct them, inserting the absent capital letter and full stop later.

Now, as mentioned earlier, you will notice something different about this classroom. It’s worth remembering that, in Year 1, five- and six-year-olds are making the transition from the more child-led, free-flow learning in Reception to the more formal ‘sit-down’ education. This can and should take time; let’s not forget that in some countries, formal learning begins much later.

So, capital letters and full stops tend to get lost in the whole transition. Thus, for lots of children, getting sentence structure correct at that stage is beyond them. By the time many pupils reach Year 2, the use of the capital letter and full stop is taking shape, but rarely ever secure.

Onwards, to Year 2

We’re getting close, dear reader. We are approaching a breakthrough. Enter that Year 2 classroom and see what happens.

Rather than using the remaining year in KS1 focusing on developing and consolidating pupils’ understanding of the simple sentence, teachers also have a statutory requirement to introduce the use of commas to make a list, as well as apostrophes to mark contractions and show possession, even though pupils are



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not required to use these to reach the expected standard. Yeah, I know – who makes these rules?

With pressure from leaders to maximise the number of pupils reaching greater depth where use of these features is required, teachers often begin explicitly teaching this additional punctuation before most pupils have got to grips with capital letters and full stops. This is despite the fact that it might be preferable to expose pupils to these implicitly through shared reading and writing, where pupils who are ready tend to pick them up.

You might ask why schools with limited resources feel the pressure to focus so much on maximising the number of pupils reaching greater depth at all when there are children struggling to meet expectations. It would be a good question.

So, in Year 2, we encounter a collection of very young children unable to embed basic sentence structure because more complex material comes at them from all directions. While many leaders believe that if you aim high and teach to the high-attaining pupils it will raise standards for everyone, it can often serve to create easily forgotten, surface learning for the many.

Don't stop, we're getting close ...

But is that all? I am afraid not. Look closer and you will see that, rather than supporting pupils to grasp simple sentence structure through writing “simple, coherent narratives about personal experiences and those of others (real or fictional)”, as the TAF describes, teachers often feel the need to use over-complicated, unfamiliar but “exciting” contexts more likely to overload pupils.

While these very young pupils should be writing about what they know and what is deeply familiar, they often find themselves having to write about parts of the world they've never been to, or imagining life from the point of view of a person or even an animal of which they may have very little understanding or knowledge.

The truth is, little minds can't always process all of this and basic sentence structure at the same time. Hell, big minds can't either – have you seen my notebooks?

In the UK, the Great Fire of London is a popular topic for Year 2. Here, pupils are often asked to write in role as Samuel Pepys. Consequently, not only must they organise their ideas and use appropriate adjectives to describe London ablaze, but they also need to think like a 400-year-

old diarist. No wonder the full stop and capital letter get lost.

Follow the lead!

Oh, we're not done. Did you think we'd nailed it? Not yet, not yet ...

When pupils start Year 3, they have a wobbly idea of a sentence, then, lo and behold, inverted commas for speech arrive, and our capital letter and full stop are lost again.

Teachers keep saying, "Don't forget your capital letters and full stops," and yet children forget them every day because they're thinking about what they've been asked to: recording speech.

And so the capital letter and full stop are confined to the subs' bench once more. Unloved and unused. Bless them.

And so, we've cracked the case

So, we know why they go missing. You got it, right? Now we have to work out how to find them again.

Teachers in Key Stage 2* (KS2) try all manner of methods to coax those capital letters and full stops back into pupils' minds.

One teacher I know always told his pupils to read their work aloud, then when they took a breath to use a full stop and start a new sentence. This had some initial success, except with the children who could hold their breath for three whole paragraphs.

Other teachers, myself included, also try more technical approaches by expounding definitive rules, such as that a sentence always contains a verb. This can help, but then what happens when they write sentences like, "What a commotion!" and "How about some pudding?" What then?

It's important to teach the basic rule, but also the exception as well.

Another useful technique is for children to physically cut up short pieces of text into sentences and examine how each sentence is structured. I also find that giving pupils text without capitals and full stops for them to correct helps them to recognise their own errors when they come to edit their work.

It's vital to encourage pupils to go back to edit and improve writing. Some teachers get pupils to use different colours for capitals and full stops, which draw children's attention to when they are absent.

So what's the best method? There isn't one. It's more likely that a range of different approaches is required to remind children to punctuate sentences.

But whatever teachers try, one thing is clear: capital letters and full stops must be returned to time and time again throughout KS2 if pupils have a hope of leaving primary school with these secure.

Is that case closed? Not quite. To my mind, all this searching for our elusive capital letter and full stop is more likely to be unnecessary if writing in KS1 is focused on the expected standard outlined in the TAF, such as simple sentence structure and familiar contexts for writing, rather than leapfrogging towards higher content taught within obscure contexts.

Only then can the case of the missing capital letter and full stop be closed.

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**Editor's note: According to the UK National Curriculum, Key Stage 1 covers Years 1 and 2 (students aged 5-7 years old), while Key Stage 2 covers Years 3 through 6 (students aged 7-11 years old). The UK's 'Reception' year is equivalent to Australia's 'Foundation' year (e.g., Prep). Very similar requirements for grammar and punctuation are outlined in the Australian Curriculum (e.g., Year 1 achievement standard: '[Students] use capital letters and full stops and form all upper- and lower-case letters correctly'; [ACARA, 2020](#)).*

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